

It's about time the EPA got serious

No one yet knows how harmful toxic ash buried on the former Valley Forge General Hospital site really is. One thing is certain, though. The delay the public has endured so far, to know as little as it does, is inexcusable.

The Phoenixville School District wanted to build a school on the abandoned army hospital property in Schuylkill township. But in 1988 district officials noticed sink holes forming in some spots on the land. They asked the Army Corps of Engineers to investigate.

No response.

They asked again. No response.

Finally, pestered by a third request, the corps sent an engineering team to the site.

Two years later, the corps still has no response. It never provided the district with the engineering team's report.

Undaunted, the district last fall paid for its own soil tests. The results show sinkage may be the least of problems on the property. For below the surface, according to the tests, the ground is permeated by dangerously high levels of lead, silver, zinc, and barium.

The chemical contaminants likely are the residue from ashes of material burned at a hospital incinerator. X-rays, infectious waste, body parts and who-knows-what-else were burned and buried there.

Who knows what else? How do we get rid of it? Is it harming local residents, and is it linked to incidents of lymph node cancer found in five men who once lived nearby? Finding someone to answer those questions, much less finding the answers themselves, has lengthened the delay.

School and township leaders talked with the federal Environmental Protection Agency. They talked with the state Department of Environmental Resources. They talked with state legislators. They talked with U.S. Sen John Heinz. They even talked with the Army Corps of Engineers ... again.

It seems every bureaucrat passed the hot potato to somebody else, but the bottom line was no response.

Until Wednesday.

On Wednesday it looked like possibly, hopefully, finally the problem received attention. At a township board meeting, Schuylkill Supervisor Ted Ryan announced the EPA has agreed to hire an environmental consultant. In June, NUS Corp. of Wayne will determine how urgently the site needs to be cleaned up, and report back to EPA.

Ryan, ever the diplomat, said every agency the township contacted has been helpful. Maybe so.

It's too bad our community has had to wait so long to learn how helpful they could be.



"That's not the utility's fault," Herman said. "For all practical purposes, when a pipe becomes badly corroded it's dead, even if you're still getting water out of it.

"In that case the service line is inadequate, and it is the property owner's responsibility to correct that."

Herman said he regretted giving frustrated water customers the additional bad news Thursday. However, he said water customers can avoid such problems in the future by having their older pipes replaced with copper ones. Copper pipes, he said, do not corrode like galvanized pipes.

It could not be determined Thursday exactly how many water customers were having problems with older piping.

Prom-bound students to get message

By AUSTIN KIRKBRIDE
Mercury Staff Writer

PHOENIXVILLE - If prom-bound students haven't gotten the message yet, they will when they pick up their tuxedo or corsage later today.

The message: don't drink and drive. The messenger: a local group that wants to show it cares about prom-goers' lives.

Some 10,000 cards have been distributed to area florists and men's apparel shops by the Chester County and Delaware County Mothers Against Driving Drunk. The cards read "You're Starting a Beautiful Evening. Let It End That Way. Have a Good Time. Don't Drink and Drive."

Cards for the tuxedos are tucked in the vest pocket of the jacket. Cards for the corsages are in the box. MADD member Dale Ninneman has spent the last few days padding around town to ensure every florist and men's shop had them.

Ninneman lost his 19-year-old son to a drunk driver six years ago.

Dale Ninneman II, a year out of high school, was on his way home from work on Route 724 when he was hit.

"Dale lost four of his friends the last year in high school," Ninneman said. "Three were killed in drunk driving accidents."

Ninneman said his son tried to start a Students Against Driving Drunk chapter at Phoenixville Area High School and Dale used to drive people home on Saturday nights.

"He'd get a call and go out and pick people up so he could take them home safely," Ninneman said.

As a result of his son's death, Ninneman and his wife, Helen, have been active members in MADD. They serve as liasons to the high school and the community.

(Prom-bound to P-3)